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ABSTRACT

Seven focus groups were held in an Appalachian county in western North Carolina to examine residents' socially constructed identity as "mountain people." The groups were asked seven general discussion questions about social change, quality of life, and the terms "mountain people" and "Southerners." In striking contrast to previous studies of mountain communities, the results indicate a strong, positive cultural identity among participants. Discussion of the meaning of "mountain people" generated a portrait of a people who see themselves as self-sufficient, trustworthy and morally upright, and embedded in personal communities with a deeply rooted heritage. Major themes included knowing how to survive, the importance of ethical standards and one's reputation, neighbors helping neighbors, traditions and values associated with grandparents, young people's growing dependence on technology and loss of basic survival skills such as gardening, community change related to newcomers and the forces of globalization and materialism, and family breakdown and loss of cultural continuity due to deteriorating child-rearing practices. (Contains 17 references.) (SV)

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Mountain Identity and the Global Society in a Rural Appalachian County

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Mountain Identity and the Global Society in a Rural Appalachian County

Identity in Appalachia is characteristically defined in terms of social class identity, for the common paradigm used to interpret the region is one of class oppression (e.g. Billings & Goldman 1983; Eller 1982; Gaventa 1980; Lewis et al. 1978, Whisnant 1980). This paradigm leads to an emphasis on socioeconomic divisions within the region's population and the development of internal class conflict. It also promotes the study of poverty and powerlessness, which pervade Appalachian studies (see Billings & Blee 2000; Salstrom 1994; Stewart 1998 for recent examples).

It is not surprising, therefore, that few studies examine cultural identity in the region, since this concept implies cultural resources. The concept of cultural identity developed from tribal and ethnic studies in which cultural groups are conceptualized as having common beliefs, values and attitudes which form the basis of a group-held sense of peoplehood. The concept of culture is based on the idea of a core pattern of beliefs and behaviors in the cultural group, rather than emphasizing the range of diversity encountered in the group. Cultural identity is typically considered only one of many manifestations of identity held by members of the group; other identities include social class identity, national identity, gender identity, personal identity, family identity, etc. In other words, cultural identity and social class identity are not mutually exclusive concepts. It is argued here that both must be taken into account for a complete understanding of a cultural group.

Regional ethnographers tend to emphasize that mountain people are characterized by distinctive cultural traits and values, and in doing so they seem to imply the existence

of mountain identity. But they rarely address the issue directly (c.f. Beaver 1986; Bryant 1981; Hicks 1976). In those instances in the Appalachian studies literature where Appalachian identity is addressed, authors often present it as the result of external forces, such as stereotypes and discrimination (Campbell 1994; Shapiro 1978), or urban migration to areas outside the region and the social and economic structure of cities (Philliber and Obermiller 1987).

Stephen Foster's (1988) study is one of the few to examine the socially constructed nature of identity in the mountains. Social constructionist theories emphasize the ways in which group boundaries , identities and cultures are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction inside and outside the cultural group (Barth 1969; Nagel 1998). The nature of the group is mutable and situational as it responds to internal and external realities. Constructionist studies necessarily reflect social processes as "individuals and groups create and recreate their personal and collective histories, the membership boundaries of their group, and the content and meaning of their ethnicity" (Nagel 1998:240).

The process of globalization presents a particularly significant context in which to examine the construction of mountain identity. In the last three decades, the county which is the site of our research has experienced major social, economic, and political changes. Factories are no longer family-owned enterprises having been engulfed by large corporations or more significantly having just relocated to the Third World; community banks have been bought out by corporate financial institutions; the local political Democratic machine has broken down with state and federal political shifts; and the in-migration of wealthy newcomers and migrant Hispanic laborers complicate the social

landscape. It is in this context that we set out to study Bradfordians socially constructed identity as mountain people.

Our research demonstrates that mountaineers clearly conceptualize themselves as a people (albeit socially diverse) with a common culture and identity. At the same time, there is concern among mountain people from all walks of life about the perceived breakdown of their culture and the sense of loss of identity as a people as a result of global changes in the late twentieth century. And they worry about the loss of their way of life; they express concern about the new cultural forms being adopted; and they worry about the future of their children and grandchildren.

Methodology

The study is based on an NSF-funded two-year study by Elvin Hatch and Susan Keefe of a rural county of about 10,000 people in western North Carolina which we call Bradford County (a pseudonym). The only urban area in the county is the county seat with a population of about 2300. The study incorporated various methodologies including participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and a survey of 630 adults in the county.

The data in this paper comes particularly from seven focus groups conducted in the fall, 1999. The focus groups were organized to compliment the survey research which focused on perceptions concerning social, political, economic, and cultural changes in the county and in the nation. Seven general questions were asked by the moderator to generate discussion among focus group participants.

(1) If you were to choose the single most important thing going on today in Bradford County, what would it be and why?

(2) Would you say that things in Bradford County are going in the right direction or are off on the wrong track?

(3) Is the quality of life in Bradford County better today than it was 30 years ago?

(4) Would you say that things in America are going in the right direction or are off on the wrong track?

(5) Is the quality of life for Americans better today than it was 30 years ago?

(6) We have heard people use the term "mountain people" in our conversations with people in Bradford County. What does this term mean to you?

(7) Do you identify as Southerners? What does this term mean to you?

Focus groups were held in the evening in public facilities, such as rural volunteer fire departments and a public utilities office meeting room. They typically lasted about an hour and a half. Meetings were both video and audio taped, and the audio tapes were transcribed and then analyzed for content.

A total of 61 people came together in the seven focus groups. Focus groups consisted of an average of nine people selected to represent a constituent segment of the population, such as Democrat men or church women. Participants averaged 46 years old and ranged from 20 to 81 years of age. One of the seven groups consisted of black women in the county; the rest were white residents. The vast majority of participants (44 or 72%) were native Appalachians by birth, mostly from Bradford County and the immediate environs. While one or more non-native Appalachians were present in all seven focus groups, non-natives predominated only in the newcomer group. Participants

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averaged 14 years of education with a range from 10th grade to graduate school. Participants held a variety of blue collar and white collar occupations including teacher, realtor, minister, police officer, factory worker, mechanic, plant manager, farmer, carpenter, electrical contractor, truck driver, and salesman.

The following provides a brief description of each focus group:

(1) Six Democrat men, mostly in their 40's, including residents from town and the county

(2) Seven Republican women, all over the age of 50, including residents from town and the county

(3) Nine black women, in their 40's and 50's, including residents from town and the county

(4) Thirteen volunteer firemen, in their 20's and 30's, residing in a rural district on the western side of the county

(5) Ten newcomer men and women, in their 50's and 60's, residents of both town and county

(6) Five church women, ranging from 43 to 81 years of age, residents of a rural township

(7) Eleven volunteer firemen, in their 20's and 30's, residing in a rural district on the eastern side of the county

The Shape of Mountain Identity

Our research presents a striking contrast to previous studies of mountain communities in that we find a strong, positive cultural identity among the people of

Bradford County. Bradfordians are indeed sensitive to the negative stereotypes held by mainstream Americans about Appalachians, yet their own identity is not so much a reaction to this prejudice as it is a homegrown positive sense of peoplehood. For example, focus group participants were immediate and direct in response to the moderator's question "What does the term mountain people mean to you?," saying things such as:

That's us.

I just think it's a compliment.

We're proud of it.

What emerges from participants discussion of the meaning of "mountain people" is a portrait of a people who see themselves as self-sufficient, who have a reputation for being trustworthy and morally upright, and who are embedded in personal communities with a deeply-rooted heritage. Let us look at these characteristics in more depth.

"We Know How to Survive"

Self-sufficiency is the primary trait mentioned for mountain people. According to a twenty-year old fire fighter, "Mountain people know how to life off the land, know how to hunt and fish, know how to grow a garden." In other words, mountain people have a self-image of resourcefulness, and they have the store of knowledge and common sense necessary "to survive if it comes down to survival." They are especially proud of their quality of resilience in the face of adversity, whether it be sudden unemployment or a

natural disaster such as a storm or flood. There is the sense that mountain people can make do with low-tech solutions when necessary.

As part of their can-do attitude, mountain people are self-admitted hard workers, and work is at the core of their identity as individuals and as a people. A respect for physical labor is the basis for the mountain-style status system, which many ethnographers describe as "egalitarian" (Beaver 1986; Hicks 1976). Mountain people won't tolerate "snobby" people who look down their noses at either physical labor or those who are the laborers. This rejection of mainstream conceptions of status also involves disapproval of conspicuous consumption, indebtedness, and what is construed as extravagance.

"Your Reputation is a Strong Part of It; There's Kind of a Code"

Mountain people set high ethical and moral standards for themselves. Speaking of the moral qualities of mountain people, a 51 year old woman said, "If you were making a deal, whatever it would be, a handshake was as good as anything on paper. Your word was your bond." To break your bond would affect your reputation, your "worth" (see Beaver 1986), and cause social ruptures in your community networks.

These standards of moral conduct are connected to the religious world view. While not all attend church, mountain people typically read the Bible and profess a belief in God. A Bradfordian with a good reputation is often called a "good Christian." This implies that he or she has been born again, or "saved," and has accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior. It also implies a belief in the conservative morals of the Religious

Right, such as disapproval of abortion, homosexuality, divorce, extra-marital sex, drinking, and drugs. There is general public support for posting the 10 Commandments in the public schools and courthouses. The Commandments are generally accepted to provide positive rules for living. The commandment "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (Exodus 20:16) in fact encompasses their concern with honesty and "your bond."

"It's Neighbors Helping Neighbors"

Mountain people are perceived to be anchored in personal communities. "Here, everybody knows who their next door neighbor is," said a 48 year old truck driver. Bradforders pride themselves on being friendly and hospitable. For example, people in cars typically wave at each other as they pass, and county residents mention being able to recognize virtually every name listed in the telephone book.

Focus group participants believe that their communities are made up of people who not only know one another but who care for one another. "If one of us was driving home and saw somebody [in trouble], I'd say 99% of us would stop and help them out even if we didn't know them.," said a 23 year old technician.

Focus group participants believe this community spirit contributes to the aforementioned qualities of survival and high moral standards. A school administrator said,

> You have confidence in yourself because you've had experiences to show that even when you have no idea what to do or how to handle the situation, the

community will come in to save you....It makes you feel secure and confident. People tend to benefit from that community support that they know is there...they know it intuitively.

"We Remember the Grandparents"

Mountain people are believed to carry on traditional ways that have been lost elsewhere. Most commonly mentioned traditions are a part of the survival trait complex, especially gardening and canning food, but also skills like quilting and sewing. These traits are associated in people's minds with the older generation. "A lot of it goes back to old-fashioned values, what we remember of our grandfolks," said a 30 year old salesman.

Remembering parents and grandparents is a significant way for Bradfordians to think about "mountain people." In fact, in response to the question "What does the term "mountain people" mean, focus group participants often recalled a parent or grandparent who in their mind embodies the qualities of mountain people. Sarah, a 43 year old teacher's assistant, said,

> Daddy was a true mountain man. He was honest, hardworking. He'd give you the shirt off his back....No matter what hour you needed him, he'd be there. He won't give up his garden. He always grows too much and gives a lot of it away. He taught us about God... He has strong moral values. Lies were never tolerated. His word was as good as anything. There was right and wrong in our day [when we were growing up]. We respected our father and did the things he asked out of respect for him.

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Focus group participants are equally emphatic that these qualities of mountain people are under assault given the changes brought about by globalization. Only the most progressive focus group of Democrat men felt that things were moving in the right direction in Bradford County and the country as a whole. The other six focus groups felt strongly that things were off track. In most cases, these feelings were tied directly to perceived changes that threaten the four aspects of mountain identity just discussed.

"A Lot of People Don't Even Grow a Garden Anymore"

Gardens are ubiquitous in Bradford County, and gardening is symbolic of the self-sufficiency of mountain people. Yet, anxiety surfaced again and again among focus group members that this trait was disappearing. "When my mother grew up," said Jack, a 23 year old technician, "she was taught how to preserve food. Now, it's just not passed along like it was then. Now everybody's used to just going to the store and buying food, instead of canning what they grow in the garden for the winter. People are not as self-sufficient as they used to be." The concern here is not only for the loss of skills, but also the loss of control over one's destiny. Participants also expressed concern over the increasing dependence on technology. "It seems like a lot of guys my age," said Jack, "have never had any responsibility. It's not as bad now, but a couple of generations later, it'll be real bad. And that goes back to the technology dependency, everything always being there."

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Bradforders worry about young people not learning skills like gardening and not learning to assume responsibilities at a young age. Part of this has to do with the changing economy, since children no longer grow up doing farm chores. But it also has to do with changing expectations in the younger generation. "Whenever somebody gets married now," said a 26 year old factory supervisor, "you want the washer and dryer, you want the $200,000 modular home. And right there, you're in debt. And you probably will be for 30 or 40 years. Back 40 years ago, more than likely, you was going to get some land given to you. Your family was probably going to help you build your house, was going to help you get started, and you wouldn't be in debt for the awful sum that you would be today." Giving young people cars and credit cards are also cited as examples of encouraging a "lack of responsibility and taking care of yourself." "Children need to want something once in a while, not have everything just handed to them," said Mona, an 81 year old widow. "I think they need to want something and really work for it, earn it. It makes them appreciate it more."

The presence of newcomers in the county gives more visibility to this new way of life. They bring new values, new modes of child rearing, and new status systems that contrast with mountain ways. "These incomers are building all these nice, fancy homes, but the original people in the mountains, they live a good life but they're not real extravagant," says a 28 year old mechanic. Focus group participants are also well aware of the economic impact of newcomers, particularly as they drive land prices and property taxes out of the range of local people.

"We Have Definitely Lost Out on Morals"

Bradfordians are in almost universal agreement that the moral condition of the nation has declined. "There are so many people now that can look you in the eye and lie to you," said a retired woman. "When I was growing up, I didn't even think about things like that. It didn't happen." Focus group participants say honesty is no longer expected in business or government. "Our leaders and our government lie and get by and even in some cases ministers," said Sarah. "So you think, well, if it's okay for them to tell a little one and get by with it, why not try it a little bit or excuse it a little bit more." What do their children learn, Bradfordians ask, when they see President Clinton lie and get off? With the loss of honesty, Bradforders are concerned that people don't respect each other anymore. This leads in turn, they believe, to a lack of respect for human life in general and events such as the indiscriminant shootings at Columbine High School and other places.

Bradfordians also see a loss of respect for authority. "When I was young," remembers Mona, "if you got a spanking at school, you'd get one when you got home." Several focus group members commented that nowadays, a parent can be sued if they spank their child. They worry that parents are afraid to correct their children and that discipline is lax in the schools. And they express concern that people don't go to church like they used to and that they have forgotten about God. Many focus group participants were concerned that prayer had been taken out of the schools. "I think when they took prayer and God out of the schools, that's when our crime rate really climbed. 'Cause when you start leaving God out of anything, the devil takes over," said Paula, a 59 year

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old woman. Focus group participants see a relationship between these things: mothers working and having less time for their children, fewer parents taking their children to church, families spending less time together, children going undisciplined, parents trying to buy their children's love, children failing to learn responsibility and losing respect for their parents. They see these things contributing to national problems including welfare, crime, drug abuse, and moral decay in general.

"People in Cars Don't Wave as Much as They Used To"

Bradforders feel their personal face-to-face communities are coming apart. They complain that they don't know people when they walk into the local restaurants anymore and teachers don't know the families of the children in the schools. "I've lived in Bradford County about all my life and I used to know everybody I met on the street, and now I hardly know anybody," said a retired factory worker. "It's new people coming in here," said a 72 year old woman. "Take the phone book, that tells you plenty. We don't know a third of the people in the phone book anymore."

Focus group participants generally lament the loss of their neighborhood schools through consolidation, the loss of community banks with corporate buyouts, and the loss of mom-and-pop stores with competition from national chains. In-migration has led to increasing diversity as well as population growth. Newcomers include wealthy retirees and second home owners, middle-class Cuban Americans from Florida, and Spanish-speaking migrant workers in the Christmas tree industry. Growing heterogeneity threatens native residents' sense of community identity. While they say they welcome

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newcomers who want to adapt to local ways, Bradforders dislike "outsiders" who resist adaptation to local norms or who are just unfriendly. "There's so many of them that come up here," complained a country store owner, "they act like they don't want to know nobody."

Newcomers introduce new values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that often run counter to mountain cultural patterns. "Mountain people," said Dwight, a 39 year old dairy farmer, "they're all pretty much good neighbors. If somebody's having trouble with sickness, everybody falls in and helps them. But the people who move up here from the flatlands, you know, they think if you've got sickness, they think that's an opportunity. They think if you're getting a little low on money, they can buy you out. They're looking out for old number one all the time. People up here ain't like that. They try to help the community." Focus group participants actually notice a decline in community interaction and reciprocity among their own people as well, as illustrated in this exchange between Republican women discussing changes in the past 30 years:

> Reba: "People in Bradford County are not as concerned about each other, I don't think."
>
> Sally: "It's just like everywhere else. They're more materialistic. I think kids, my own included, have their priorities in the wrong place."
>
> Darlene: "Television has a major impact on people's lives everywhere."
>
> Dana: "Now people will watch TV instead of visiting or going to church."
>
> Lynette: "Thirty years ago, you knew your neighbors well, you visited. And if they needed something, you were there. Today, you hardly know your neighbors and everyone works all the time. You don't have time to visit."

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Gina: "It's the dollar sign."

Another common complaint is that you can't trust anyone anymore due to the breakdown of community.

Focus group participants are alarmed at the changes in Bradford County introduced by global capitalism. They worry about the changes in banking because they can no longer get a loan without an impersonal approval based on the numbers at the bank headquarters in metropolitan Charlotte. They worry about the disappearance of their downtown business district. "If you want to understand," said Daryl, a 48 year old truck driver, "just play Alan Jackson's "The Little Man" (referring to a popular country song about the demise of small entrepreneurs)." Focus group members are upset by what they see as government intrusion in their families and communities, focussing on issues such as school prayer, welfare, and child discipline. They bristle at the growing bureaucracy and rational efficiency of their county. "We used to have a school superintendent that you could meet on the street, and if you had a problem you could stand right there on the street and talk to him," said Dwight. "Now you've got to make an appointment with the principal, and then you've got to make an appointment with the assistant superintendent, and then you make an appointment with the superintendent. You have to go through three people before you ever talk to him." Mountain communities, in other words, work differently today and mountain people feel dislocated as a result.

"A Lot of Parents Today Let Their Kids be Brought Up by TV or the Internet"

Whereas the term "mountain people" evoked reflections about parents and grandparents, focus group participants turned their attention to the younger generation when asked about recent social changes. Many individuals mentioned family breakdown as one of their significant concerns. "Mobility has an impact," said a school administrator. "When you've got grandma and grandpa there to help raise and support the kids, it provides modeling and the expectation of certain behaviors and self-confidence building experiences. I think a mobile society and a society that is in change tends to break down those kinds of traditional life patterns." Bradforders are concerned that there are not the kinds of local jobs that will keep young people in the county. They worry that, with the rising price of land, young couples cannot afford to buy a house of their own. They see young people being pushed and pulled out of the county and away from their extended families. As a result, cultural continuity between the generations is broken.

Another aspect of family breakdown (already touched on) that focus group participants recognize is that children today lack responsibility and respect. After Sarah finished recalling her Daddy (the "true mountain man" referred to in a previous section), she commented that respect for parents is not being instilled today: "It's something you can't buy. It has to be learned and felt, and it's something that just don't leave you. And I think that's what's wrong with a lot of our young kids today." Bradfordians recognize an increasing commodification of human relationships. Parents try to buy their children's

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love with material things. Children judge their parents love on the basis of the material things they receive. Bradforders are concerned that family relations are less a matter of kinship and more a matter of legal bonds between autonomous individuals. "There is no discipline now," said Daryl. "You can't discipline your children. They'll box your jaws or sue you." Moreover, many Bradforders believe that the government facilitates the breakdown of familial ties. "It's like, I can get a divorce, I can take the kid, I'll get the government to help, and that's the way it is," said a 26 year old sales manager.

Like the pro-life proponents in Faye Ginsberg's Contested Lives (1989), Bradforders critique the ideology of market rationality when expressing concern about the decline in nurturance of others: the unborn, the young, and the elderly. "I get so upset about these elderly people having to do without," said Paula. "We're sending all this foreign aid overseas when we can't even help our elderly here in the U.S." Mountain people are characterized as "caring" people, and focus group participants are dismayed that changes in the political economy are undermining this non-instrumental basis for human relations.

Conclusion

The people of Bradford County have a strong sense of cultural identity as mountain people. Clearly, this sense of common identity has emerged over generations and across the social class system. It is possible that the special circumstances of Bradford County have nurtured this cultural identity, because the extractive industries have not dominated Bradford's economy and it has a strong entrepreneurial middle class.

But identification as "mountain people" is found commonly in neighboring counties in North Carolina as well. I would argue that due to the dominating Appalachian paradigm of class conflict, cultural identity has simply been ignored as a topic of study.

Identity is often strengthened in situations of conflict, and this may be occurring in Bradford County. Recent social changes in the county have been associated with globalization and the introduction of neoliberal economic values, including scientific rationality, the value of technology, instrumental human relations, consumption and materialism, and individual autonomy. These changes have sharpened Bradfordians' sense of mountain identity, perhaps because mountain people are perceived to hold values that contradict all of these neoliberal values. But most Bradforders also express an impending sense of loss of their people's self-sufficiency, moral integrity (particularly in Christian terms), and community and family cohesion. Whether they will be able to re-construct a sense of cultural identity given a new era of globalization inconsistent with their traditional values remains to be seen.

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